

VZCZCXRO7233
PP RUEHDE
DE RUEHTU #1159/01 2341536
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221536Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3742
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY 0145
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 7525
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY
RUEHNJ/AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA PRIORITY 0037
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI PRIORITY 0147

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 001159

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS AND HOPKINS)
STATE ALSO FOR H - PLEASE PASS CODEL JACKSON LEE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL JACKSON LEE

Summary

¶1. (U) Embassy Tunis warmly welcomes Representative Sheila Jackson Lee and Representative Steve Chabot to Tunis from August 29 - August 30, 2007. Tunisia proudly -- and justifiably -- calls itself a "country that works." Despite Tunisia's relatively small economy and lack of natural resources, the Tunisian government has proven itself capable of providing basic education, health care, housing and a workable infrastructure to its population. Tunisia has the most diversified economy in the region and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. The political system is dominated by a single party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), and political liberties are tightly controlled. This cable provides background information on these themes. The Embassy has requested a meeting with President Ben Ali, but due to time constraints we do not believe this meeting is likely. The Embassy has also requested a meeting with Foreign Minister Abdallah. END SUMMARY.

The Bilateral Relationship

¶2. (SBU) Your visit takes place in the context of a long-standing and positive bilateral relationship; the United States was the first Western power to recognize an independent Tunisia in 1956. The Embassy has requested a meeting with President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, but due to time constraints the Embassy does not believe this meeting is likely. Embassy has also requested a meeting with Foreign Minister Abdallah. Tunisian officials may wish to discuss the latest political, economic and security issues relevant to the US-Tunisian bilateral relationship, as well as regional issues.

¶3. (SBU) Recent high-level visits include the February 2006 visit by former Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and a May 2006 visit by then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick. More recently, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Edmund Giambastiani visited and Tunisia hosted the 22nd US-Tunisia Joint Military Commission (JMC) meetings, both in May 2007. The Government of Tunisia warmly welcomed CODEL Tanner in June and CODEL Costello August 18-20.

Socio-Economic Context

14. (SBU) Tunisia proudly -- and justifiably -- calls itself a "country that works." Despite Tunisia's relatively small economy and lack of natural resources, the Tunisian government provides basic education, health care, housing and a workable infrastructure to its population. Tunisian women enjoy more rights and opportunities than in any other Arab Muslim country. As a result of these policies, the majority of Tunisians are generally moderate and desire a government intent on modernizing the country and integrating it fully into the world economy.

15. (U) Tunisia has the most diversified economy in the region and enjoys one of the highest standards of living on the continent. The country does not have vast reserves of hydrocarbons like its neighbors Algeria and Libya but has prospered under long-standing government policies to develop manufacturing industries for export and to promote tourism. The Government of Tunisia also seeks to attract foreign direct investment and strengthen its traditional agricultural sector. Thanks to these policies, Tunisia's economy has maintained average annual growth rates of almost five percent over the past ten years. At the same time, social programs limit population growth, provide a high standard of education, and ensure a relatively decent standard of living for all. Average annual per capita income is approximately US \$3000. The United States hopes Tunisia will be part of President Bush's vision of a Middle East Free Trade Area, but the preliminary Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) has not produced tangible results, in part due to Tunisian concerns about the impact of rapid economic liberalization.

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Political Overview

16. (SBU) Tunisia is a constitutional republic with a population of approximately 10 million, dominated by a single political party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been the president since 1987. Although three opposition parties fielded candidates in the October 2004 presidential election, official results indicated that President Ben Ali won approximately 94 percent of the registered popular vote. The official turnout was reportedly higher than 90 percent of registered voters, although there were indications that voter turnout figures were fraudulently inflated. Tunisia has a bicameral legislature. In addition to the Chamber of Deputies, a second legislative body, the Chamber of Advisors, was created in a 2002 referendum amending the Constitution. The legislature plays a limited role as an arena for debate on national policy but never introduces legislation and virtually always passes bills presented by the Executive with only minor changes. National elections -- both presidential and legislative -- will be next held in 2009.

17. (SBU) Political liberties remain tightly controlled and civil society development is stifled. Tunisia's sluggishness on political reform has been a point of contention in the US-Tunisian relationship in recent years. Although President Ben Ali has introduced some positive political reforms in the past two years (pardoning some political prisoners, lifting a form of censorship for print media, registering a new political party and independent media outlets), civil society and human rights groups remain deeply cynical and continue to report many instances of government harassment, intimidation, and limits on their activities. Journalists reject the suggestion that press censorship has ended and local media usually lacks any meaningful coverage of domestic political issues. In the 2006 Reporters Without Borders Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Tunisia was ranked 148 out of 168 countries.

Security Situation

¶18. (SBU) There is a threat of terrorism in Tunisia, particularly in light of the recent establishment of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In January 2007, the Government of Tunisia announced that Tunisian security forces disrupted a terrorist group in December 2006/January 2007, killing or capturing many individuals who reportedly planned to carry out acts of violence in Tunisia. The US Embassy in Tunis was reportedly among the group's intended targets. In 2002, a faction of al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for an attack on the Ghriba synagogue on the southern island of Djerba, the first al-Qaeda related terrorist attack after September 11.

¶19. (SBU) The Government of Tunisia remains concerned about signs of increasing Islamic extremism and considers national security as one of its major priorities. Therefore, it places a high value on its historic and robust military-military relationship with the United States. Unfortunately, and against the backdrop of a very limited national budget, new equipment is needed to match the evolving and common threat of transnational terrorism. In FY 2007, Tunisia will receive approximately US \$8 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), nearly all of which is used for the partial maintenance of its aging fleets of US-origin equipment. FMF is expected to drop dramatically in FY 2008 to approximately US \$2 million, which will make any significant recapitalization of the Tunisian Armed Forces problematic, unless additional third-country or other financing is secured.

Mission Overview

¶10. (SBU) The US Mission in Tunisia is a medium-sized post with almost 100 direct-hire American staff, including some 20 full-time Arabic students. It consists of the Department of State, including the Middle East Partnership Initiative Regional Office and the Foreign Service Institute's Advanced Arabic Language Field School, as well as the US Defense Attache Office, the Office of Defense Cooperation, the

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American Battle Monuments Commission, and the US Executive Director's Office at the African Development Bank. A new embassy compound was completed and occupied in November 2002 on a 20-acre site located halfway between downtown Tunis and the northern suburbs.

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